



Yes, but... I don't have time to reflect. I've got real work to do.

Reflection is one of the greatest contributors to our ability to positively alter our own thinking and behavior. If we don't spend time reflectively thinking about our practice and re-examining our values, we are in danger of mindlessly accepting certain assumptions about teaching, about our role in the classroom, about our students, without ever being aware of how these assumptions impact the way that we interact with students. Without reflection, we ultimately lose effectiveness in the classroom.

There will always be too much work to do. And yet, by taking time to reflect on your practice, you can actually figure out a better, more effective, and therefore more efficient way to manage all of that work.



Yes, but... surely you don't expect me to believe that all my problems in the classroom will magically go away if I just have a little faith?

I am not preaching that faith will magically solve all of your problems, but it is a crucial first step. Because teaching is dynamic, you will not always discover the solution to the challenges you are facing in the classroom right away. What will help you persist with students until you do find the right solution is your faith in your values. You have to believe that what you are doing is important in order to go through all that you may have to go through to make sure that it happens in the classroom. So, while faith is not the only step, it is a vital first step toward resolving your classroom challenges.

students aren't prepared to pass simply so that you can move on to the next part of your unit? Pay attention to what you have identified as your core values and see if those core values actually play out in your interactions with students. If not, then you will need to re-examine whether you truly value what you say you do.

I first understood the importance of values on my own behavior one fall when I was faced with a particularly unruly group of students. I had a class of 23 boys and 5 girls that met right after lunch. Every day, it took 20 minutes or so to get the class settled down and focused on the work. Even then, I had to keep a constant eye on my students. They took twice as long as my other classes to get through their work, and they seemed completely unmotivated. Their writing was abysmal, and they rarely did their homework. If they weren't fooling around during class, they were asleep. I did my best at first. I tried to motivate them. I tried to engage them in class discussions. I tried to point out the interesting parts of Shakespeare—the sword fights, the clever insults. They couldn't care less. I cajoled and pleaded and bribed and begged them to turn in their homework. I called their parents, I kept them in at lunch, I got their counselors involved, I sent them to the office, I gave them zeros. Nothing seemed to work. I knew I had reached a low point the day I was working with a student at his desk. Suddenly, I smelled smoke. I turned around to see that one of my students had started a fire in the trashcan. These students, I determined, were not interested in learning.

I'd always thought of myself as a dynamic and inspiring teacher, but these boys didn't seem to see me that way. They weren't inspired by my lessons. They would much rather be anywhere else but in my classroom and they made sure that I knew it. So, I started spending the majority of my time controlling the classroom rather than teaching. I instituted a host of rules and executed every part of the lesson with military precision. I even cut out all class discussions because I was afraid that they would quickly dissolve into examinations of bodily functions and crude references to drugs, guns, and sex. Soon, my classroom looked nothing like the kind of classroom I'd envisioned.

One day, in the midst of a particularly boring worksheet I looked at their glazed over faces and realized that while they were now compliant, they were not learning a thing. At that point, I came face to face with my values. Was it more important that my students be quiet and cooperative, or was it more important that they actively engage with the material and learn to be critical thinkers and effective communicators? Was it more important that I feel in control of the classroom or was it more important that my students learn?

I wish I could tell you that somehow my classroom magically transformed that very moment, but it didn't. It took me another week of grappling with

my values before I even decided to make a change. And, it took another few weeks after that before I could figure out a better system for engaging my students and muster the courage to try. Even then, there were a lot of missteps along the way. The class remained a frisky bunch, but by the end of the semester, they had settled down and were not only doing their work, they were learning. Once I made the decision that it was important that they learn what I was teaching, I also found the will to find a way to help them learn it. Once I decided to let my values rather than my constraints drive my teaching, I found the energy to figure out how to make sure that my classroom reflected my values in spite of my constraints. Reconnecting with my values helped me find the faith to persist with my students despite all of the constraints before me.

Try This

- Revisit why you went into teaching in the first place. What did you hope to accomplish as a teacher? What attracted you to the profession? These ideals, these values drive your faith. That means that if you want to increase your faith, you have to remind yourself of your values and remember why you chose to be an educator and why you still think education is important. If you can come back to that passion, to those ideals that propelled you toward this profession, you can increase your faith.
- Spend time helping students see the value of their education both by explicitly making connections between what they are learning and their lives and by explicitly explaining the implicit value of learning. Once students begin to value their education, they will begin to take more responsibility for their own learning.
- Insist that students complete every assignment. If you really believe that the assignment was worth assigning (see chapter 6 for more on this) then it is worth completing. The consequence for not completing work or completing it well should be that students have to spend more time getting it right. Do not offer students the reprieve of a poor grade. Build time into the school day (during lunch, after school, during recess, etc.) to work with students who do not complete their work and do not let students get away with sloppy or shoddy work. Insist that they give their best effort and provide them with the necessary supports to ensure that they do.

Confront the Brutal Facts of Your Reality

There is a wealth of information available in the classroom. We cannot realistically focus on all of the information that is available to us. The way that we decide on what information to focus is determined by what we believe about our own abilities and what we believe about the teaching task before us. Our beliefs function as a filter through which we sift our reality.

For one, our beliefs influence how we interpret information and formulate perceptions about our teaching situation and our students. Three teachers can see the same information and interpret it in three different ways based on their beliefs. For instance, one teacher may look at a group of students who are reading one or more grades below their current grade level and, because that teacher believes that she is not capable of bringing up their reading level by the time the state tests take place, she will see the teaching task as impossible. Another teacher may look at the teaching task and understand how much work it will entail and decide that it cannot be accomplished in such a short time. That teacher may lower his expectations for what students can, in his mind, realistically accomplish during the school year, and teach accordingly. A third teacher might look at the same teaching situation, decide that he is capable of moving students to where they need to be by the time the state tests are administered, and get to work making sure that the students meet the standards. All three teachers face the same teaching situation, but based on their beliefs about the magnitude of the teaching task and their own abilities to handle it, they each make a different decision.

In each case, the teachers used the same information, but *how* each teacher interpreted that information determined the outcome. In the first case, the teacher looked at the fact that students were below grade level and decided that, based on her beliefs about her own teaching ability, she would not be able to accomplish what needed to be done. In the second case, the teacher looked at the teaching task and, based on his beliefs about the demands of the task, decided that it could not be done. In the third case, the teacher looked at the teaching task and based on his beliefs about his own abilities, decided that the task was doable. Each of these teachers filtered the facts through their own beliefs.

So, if your beliefs determine what you pay attention to and how you interpret that information, how do you change your beliefs so that you can interpret information differently?

The answer lies in asking the right questions. Asking the right questions helps you become more intentional about what facts and experiences you pay attention to and helps you deliberately look for multiple interpretations of that data. When you do so, you can more easily adjust your beliefs and thereby alter your expectations.

Asking the right questions starts from being humble enough to understand that you do not and cannot have all the answers. It means being reflective about your own strengths and limitations as a teacher. It means talking to your students and trying to understand their perspectives. It means examining student data looking for patterns and trends and being open to more than one interpretation. And it means collecting this information without placing blame on your students or on yourself.

There are four important questions you need to ask:

1. What are my current skills and teaching strategies?
2. What are the requirements and the constraints on the teaching task at hand?
3. Are my current skills and strategies sufficient for the teaching task at hand?
4. If not, what can I do about it?

The answers to these four questions enables us to make better instructional decisions. When you take time to confront the brutal facts, the right decisions often become glaringly apparent. Sometimes you will see that you need to do something, or do something differently. Other times, you will see that you need to stop doing something (see Chapter 6 for more on this).

Confronting the brutal facts in this way helps you calibrate your beliefs about what will happen in the classroom to your current reality. Once you have made this adjustment, what you do with the information is also important. Many people are aware of the brutal facts but either ignore them or use them as an opportunity to blame someone else. If for instance, the students are not turning in their homework on a regular basis, teachers may either ignore this fact and plow ahead anyway or explain this lack of homework on students' being unmotivated. This is not confronting the brutal facts. Confronting the brutal facts means seeing that students are not turning in their homework and delving into the reasons why. It means being open to multiple reasons for their not turning in the homework. It means accepting that they

may not be motivated but also asking the question "Why aren't they motivated?" It means digging until you get to the bottom of the problem. It means looking beyond the blame and shifting our focus from what the students can and cannot do to what we can do to help them. Then and only then can you begin to figure out how to solve the problem.

Yes, but... The brutal facts are overwhelmingly brutal.

Many teachers are overwhelmed when they face their students and understand their students' deficits. They feel pressure from external demands to teach and the internal pressure to do well. Sometimes, these pressures can make it hard to maintain an unwavering faith. In times like these, it is helpful to determine which brutal facts are actually relevant to your situation and which facts you can, for the moment, ignore. Not all facts carry the same impact on your classroom. For instance, you may be overwhelmed by the fact that the parents in your school community do not seem involved and do not give you the support you need with your students. Rather than trying to change the parents' focus on what support systems you can provide for students in the classroom, ask yourself why you need parental support and then ask yourself if you could get those benefits some other way. Although it is important that you are aware of all of the brutal facts, don't try to take on everything at once. Spend your energy focusing on those brutal facts that have the greatest impact on your students' success and work to resolve them first.

Try This

- To assess the demands and constraints of your current teaching task, think about how difficult the task will be and what will it take to be successful at the task. Consider such things as what are your students' current abilities and motivation, what are the appropriate instructional strategies and how proficient are you at utilizing them, what managerial issues will the task present, what resources do you need and which ones are available, and how will you need to organize the space to maximize student engagement and success.

- Based on your assessment of the teaching task, which factors do you currently see as excuses for student failure? How can you remove or mitigate these excuses so that students can be successful?
- Rather than another "to do" list, create a "stop doing" list in which you list all the things that you are currently doing that are not getting you the results you desire. Stop doing them.
- Develop a plan for students who don't get it the first time. Use Tool 9 in the Appendix as a guide.

Make Sure to Use the Whole Equation

Both sides of the equation are necessary in order to raise your expectations. Here is where many of us fail. We only focus on one side of the equation. We face the brutal facts and become discouraged. We look at the students in front of us, see their deficits, and give up. We face the systemic restraints and throw our hands up in despair.

But we forget the unwavering faith. We must confront the brutal facts, yes, but once we have confronted the brutal facts, we must return to our faith. Confronting the brutal facts helps us understand our reality, but unwavering faith causes us to ask "What can I do today to move toward my goal *despite* the reality of my circumstances?"

Or, we focus on the other side of the equation and adopt an unwavering faith in our mission as teachers and persevere with our students, but we ignore the facts of our reality. We don't pay attention to the real demands of our teaching task or our own limitations and fail to take action to mitigate both. As a result, we are not consistently successful with students in spite of our faith. Soon, we lose our faith altogether.

You need both sides of the equation if you are going to be successful. Even still, it's really hard work. It is much easier to blame the kids or their parents or the school system or a lack of resources or anything else. But, let's face it. There are teachers out there who are in the same situation as we are and yet they manage to help their students succeed. They face the same type of students, the same institutional barriers, the same bureaucracy, the same lack of resources, the same diversity of student needs, and yet they manage to succeed. What makes the difference between whether a teacher succeeds or fails? It has little to do with the teacher's individual reality. It does however, have everything to do with how these teachers see their individual reality. They

recognize the brutal facts, yes. But doing so does not change their unwavering faith in their own ability to reach their kids *no matter what*.

No matter what.

Try This

- Deny yourself the option of failure. If you start to become discouraged, look at both sides of the equation for encouragement. Examine the brutal facts of your reality to look for ways that you can overcome the barriers before you and return to your values to find the unwavering faith you need to believe that you can triumph. Keep looking for ways that you can overcome your obstacles.
- Use both sides of the equation to assess your current reality. Rather than trying to assess everything, use your beliefs to determine what information you focus on, and your values to determine the relative importance you will give to the various information you collect.
- Deny students the option of failure. Structure your course so that students cannot choose to fail. If students do not complete work, give them an incomplete rather than a failing grade and insist that they complete their work. If students earn a failing grade on an assignment or assessment, give them an incomplete and insist that they take some corrective action either with you (come in for extra help during lunch or after school) or on their own (i.e. online tutorials, simulations, read supplementary material, try practice problems, etc.) and then redo the assignment or retake the assessment.

The Principle in Action

When I was an administrator at a middle school, we had team meetings twice a week. At these team meetings, we reviewed the progress of students on our team. We would start with students whom we considered to be in jeopardy, either because of their behavior or because of their grades, before moving on to discuss a predetermined list of students. One day, we started the meeting by discussing Jack.

"I don't care how many times I go over the material, Jack still fails his quizzes," complained Cindy, his English teacher. "It's driving me crazy."

"I have the same problem with him in math class. He just doesn't seem to get it," Richard chimed in.

Laura listened as the teachers expressed their frustration. "I had the same problem with him too, but I think I figured out what's going on with Jack."

"What did you do?" they asked, curious.

"Well, last week, we had a map test and he bombed it as usual. At first, I thought it was because he didn't study so I made him stay after school with me so that we could go over the material and then he could do a retake of the test. Well, we reviewed the material together and I realized that he had studied and knew the material already. So, I gave him the test again and he didn't do any better."

"Do you think he has a learning disability?" Erika, his guidance counselor asked.

"I thought about that," Laura admitted. "But I wasn't sure. He didn't seem to have a problem learning the material. He just had a problem showing me that he knew it. I got curious about how I could get him to show me he knew the material."

"So what did you do?" Richard asked.

"Well, I gave him another map and told him to tell me orally where places were."

"Did that work?" Brenda, his science teacher, asked.

"Well, it worked a little but I still thought we could do better. After the quiz, he told me that he was still having trouble deciding what each of the countries were and that he still got a lot of them confused. He said that he could see the map in his head but that he still had a hard time getting started when he was faced with the actual map. I didn't feel like I had figured out the problem yet."

"Good grief, Laura," Cindy sighed. "You sure did spend a lot of time and effort on this thing with Jack."

"I know," Laura smiled. "But I was curious. I wanted to figure out how I could get through to him."

"Did you figure it out?" Cindy asked.

"I think I did," Laura said slowly. "I gave him the map again. This time, I asked him to look at the whole map and then cover up a third of the map. After he filled out that third of the map, he was to cover it up and work on the next third, and then do the same thing for the last third. When he did that, he got an 80 percent."

The team discussed Laura's technique and how it might work in their own classes. After the meeting, I asked Laura how she was able to figure out what Jack needed and why she spent so much time trying.

She shrugged. "I didn't feel right having a kid in my class fail time and time again. If he was failing, then it meant that I hadn't found the right way to get through to him yet. So, I kept trying until I figured it out."

That's the power of having high expectations of ourselves. When we do, we will keep trying with a student long after we might have otherwise given up, not because we are propelled by some blind belief in that student, but because we are propelled by the very real belief in ourselves.

Getting Started

Remember that expectations have more to do with you than with your students.

1. To raise your expectations of yourself, you must raise both your values and your beliefs.
2. To raise your values, learn to maintain unwavering faith in what is important.
3. To raise your beliefs, first confront the brutal facts.
4. Be sure to tend to both sides of the equation in order to maintain your high expectations and extend them to the students.

